IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claim 1 (Previously Presented): A method for drying plant-derived biomass, said method comprising:

(a) a step of grinding plant-derived biomass,

(b) a step of treating the ground product of biomass in oil at 120-300°C under a pressure which is higher than the vapor pressure of said oil at said temperature, and

(c) a step of drying the ground product of biomass at 120-200°C,

with the sequence of steps (b) and (c) being arbitrary.

Claim 2 (Original): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein the step (b) is followed by the step (c).

Claim 3 (Original): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein the step (a) is carried out in oil.

Claim 4 (Original): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein grinding is carried out such that the ground product of plant-derived biomass has an average particle size of 1-5 mm.

Claim 5 (Original): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein the ground product of biomass is mixed with oil in a ratio of from 10:20 to 10:50 by weight.

Claim 6 (Original): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, which comprises an additional step of recovering for reuse the latent heat of evaporation of water vapor evolved in the step (c).

Claim 7 (Canceled).

Claim 8 (Currently Amended): The method for producing biomass fuel as defined in Claim [[7]] 16, wherein the coal is low-grade coal.

Claim 9 (Previously Presented): A method for producing biomass fuel, said method comprising:

(i) a step of grinding plant-derived biomass,

(j) a step of treating the ground product of biomass in oil at 120-300°C under a pressure which is higher than the vapor pressure of said oil at said temperature,

(k) a step of adding a gasifying catalyst to the ground product of biomass; and

(l) a step of drying the ground product of biomass at 120-200°C, with the sequence of steps (j) to (l) being arbitrary so long as step (k) precedes step (l).

Claim 10 (Previously Presented): A method for producing biomass fuel, said method comprising:

(m) a step of grinding plant-derived biomass,

(n) a step of treating the ground product of biomass in oil at 120-300°C under a pressure which is higher than the vapor pressure of said oil at said temperature, and

(o) a step of drying the ground product of biomass at 120-200°C, with the sequence of steps (n) and (o) being arbitrary.

Claim 11 (Original): The method for producing biomass fuel as defined in Claim 10, which comprises an additional step of adding a gasifying catalyst, said additional step being carried out before the step (o).

Claim 12 (Previously Presented): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein step (b) results in partial decomposition of the plant-derived biomass.

Claim 13 (Previously Presented): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein step (b) is carried out at a temperature between 200°C and 270°C.

Claim 14 (Previously Presented): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein step (b) is carried out at a pressure lower than 1 MPa.

Claim 15 (Previously Presented): The method for drying as defined in Claim 1, wherein step (b) is carried out for 10-90 minutes.

Claim 16 (New): A method for producing biomass fuel, said method comprising:

(d) a step of grinding plant-derived biomass,

(e) a step of producing a coal slurry from oil and coal,

(f) a step of mixing the ground product of biomass with the coal slurry, and either the following steps (g) and (h), or steps (g') and (h'):

(g) a step of treating the ground product of biomass in oil at 120-300°C under a pressure which is higher than the vapor pressure of said oil at said temperature, and

(h) a step of drying the ground product of biomass at 120-200°C,

with the sequence of steps (f) to (h) being arbitrary;

(g') a step of treating the mixture in oil at 120-300°C under a pressure which is higher than the vapor pressure of said oil at said temperature, and

(h') a step of drying the mixture at 120-200°C,

with the sequence of steps (g') to (h') being arbitrary.